
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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HD **Does Trudeau get that Montreal's climate march was far bigger than a mere campaign stop? All leaders worldwide may find, moving forward, that the younger generation will have less patience for a smile and a wave when it comes to the Earth and their futures**
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Montreal

Surrounded by a phalanx of fluorescent-vested police officers, Justin Trudeau marched among hundreds of thousands of protesters demanding stronger action to fight climate change – smiling and waving at people who think governments like his are contributing to the death of the planet.

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Not everyone who took to Montreal's streets on Friday, for the largest of many youth-led climate strikes being held across the country, displayed a harsh view toward the Liberal Leader personally. While some yelled at him for his government's oil-pipeline support, and one protester appeared intent on hurling eggs at him before being hauled away, a fair number of others were palpably excited to have him in their midst, trying to get his attention as they snapped photos.

Still, Mr. Trudeau's participation made for one of the more surreal moments of a federal election campaign that has had plenty of them. Meeting before the march with Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who has led the youth climate movement globally, was hard to argue with. Joining one of the strikes that she has inspired internationally, which involve students skipping school and in some cases adults skipping work, felt a little like a factory owner joining assembly-line workers on a picket line.

The question that would go a long way toward determining if he was right to be there is whether, beyond giving a performance on the campaign trail, he was really registering what was happening around him.

Mr. Trudeau's campaign team seems to genuinely believe that he has a reasonable place in an event like Friday's. And it's possible to see where they're coming from.

His government's actions to date – including the introduction of a national carbon price and clean fuel standard, imminent regulations aimed at cutting methane emissions and considerable infrastructure investment – add up to more than any previous Canadian government has offered by way of climate policy.

And he is certainly offering much more than the leading alternative to replace him in the Prime Minister's Office, Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, while striking a contrast to some international leaders – Donald Trump, most notably – who deny the need for climate action altogether.

But while relative success might be enough for many of the centrist voters the Liberals are targeting in hope of re-election, especially among somewhat older demographics, it plainly doesn't meet the bar that these hundreds of thousands were trying to set. And neither are the various policy promises that he rolled out during this climate-focused week – such as new tax supports for clean-tech companies, more funding for retrofitting homes and buildings, and planting lots of trees – likely to do so.

It's not just his government's purchase of the Trans Mountain pipeline that puts him at odds with what they want, though that was certainly their most visible grievance with him on Friday. He and pretty much every other head of a major government anywhere also fall far short of the general sense of urgency they're demanding – of a willingness to make climate change the centrepiece of the government's agenda, quickly upending key elements of our fossil-fuel-reliant economy in the process.

That desired urgency was evident from the great number of homemade signs wielded by protesters, which – in addition to decrivals of the oil industry, if not capitalism or consumerism in general – included many variations of the message that indifferent older generations are saddling younger ones with a nightmarish future.

Also striking was that these were not, for the most part, habitual protesters. It was pretty much the same swath of young people you would see if you wandered onto a university or high-school campus on a regular day. Many were charged with an upbeat energy that seemed to reflect a feeling of empowerment from joining en masse like this.

You had to wonder: Will the tone be much angrier a few years from now – if, say, the prime minister in their midst won another term and they didn't see enough movement toward the ambitious emissions reductions he set? Or might all that energy curdle into a fatalistic cynicism, if the evidence is still mounting that the world is headed off a climate cliff?

At least, you had to consider those possibilities if you were able to really take in where they were at now. And that couldn't be easy for Mr. Trudeau, behind all that security.

Meeting the demands of a campaigning politician, his talking point of the day was that he and protesters alike agree on the need to “do more.” And it's unlikely he'll publicly get much more reflective than that, out on the trail.

But deep down, before moving on to the next tour stops and whatever issues supplant climate on next week's campaign agenda, he'll hopefully recognize that this wasn't politics as usual. It was a coming-out moment for a generation liable to have less patience for a smile and a wave.

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